

CASE STUDY ONE

HOME OWNER – CONDUCTING SAFE HOME RENOVATIONS

Many Australians take great pride in buying older homes and lovingly renovating them. But with one third of Australian homes containing asbestos, this can be a dangerous process.

Nathan lives in Brisbane and over the years has purchased and renovated two fibro workers' cottages. Although not a qualified tradesperson, he enjoys doing as much of the renovation work as possible. In both of the homes he has renovated, Nathan has taken a careful approach to removing asbestos in order to keep his home and his neighbours safe.

How did Nathan approach the renovations?

Knowing what he was dealing with - pre-purchase asbestos report

On both occasions, at the buying stage Nathan realised that the houses - both 1940s fibro workers' cottages - would most likely contain asbestos. He had a building and pest inspection done, which also included a report on likely asbestos containing materials in the home¹. This meant that he purchased both houses knowing the location of the assumed asbestos. As a result, Nathan was able to plan renovations with full awareness of the additional costs and measures that would be required.

Arranging removal by a licensed asbestos removal company

Nathan researched legal requirements in relation to the handling and disposal of asbestos. He realised that a licensed asbestos removalist would need to perform the job because more than 10 square metres of non-friable asbestos needed to be removed².

He obtained quotes from several licensed services and checked that the removalist would:

- ∂ use special equipment (e.g. industrial vacuum cleaners and protective clothing that meet legislative requirements)
- ∂ erect warning signs and barricades and talk to Nathan's neighbours before commencing work
- ∂ dispose of the asbestos safely (e.g. wetting it down, using a double-lined industrial skip and disposing the asbestos waste at an appropriate waste disposal site)
- ∂ hold an environmental authority to transport asbestos waste to a site approved by the local council.

Considering his neighbours

Nathan spoke to his neighbours before the asbestos removal work began, to allay any concerns they may have had about potential risk of exposure to asbestos from the renovations. He assured them that procedures would be in place to remove the asbestos safely, and warned

¹ Note that not all building and pest reports will include information about asbestos. You should check with the provider of the report whether it does or does not cover asbestos containing materials. An alternative is to consider obtaining an asbestos content report.

² At the time of publication, this requirement is consistent for all states and territories, with the exception of ACT, where licensed removalists are required for all asbestos removal regardless of the size of the area. For further information about asbestos removal requirements in Queensland, go to <http://www.deir.qld.gov.au/asbestos/manage/removal.htm>

them not to be alarmed by the site of barricades and workers in protective clothing. He also gave his neighbours his phone number so that if they had any concerns while the work was taking place, they could contact him directly.

Having reassurance for himself and future buyers of the property

Although not required in Queensland for the removal jobs in question (as the materials removed contained non-friable asbestos), Nathan recognised the benefit of engaging an independent hygienist to issue a clearance certificate (also called a close-out report or hygienist's report). The hygienist conducted testing to confirm that all asbestos containing materials had been removed, there was no asbestos remaining in the property and there were no airborne asbestos fibres present after the removal work³.

Although this step posed an additional cost, it provided Nathan with an assurance that the home would be safe for his family. It also gave him independent documentation that could be provided to future buyers of the house, to assure them that there was no asbestos debris 'hidden' behind newly renovated surfaces.

Considerations when renovating a home

Nathan's approach ensured he protected his and his family's health, as well as that of his neighbours and future visitors, by ensuring the work was done to the highest standard. His approach was also financially prudent, as he was aware of the presence and condition of asbestos at the time of purchase and could plan his renovations accordingly.

When undertaking renovations, there are a several key things to consider:

- ∂ Take a precautionary approach: it is the best way to ensure renovations don't expose you or anyone else to any asbestos risks.
- ∂ Be an informed buyer: if you're considering buying a house that was built before the 1990s, get an asbestos inspection so that you know where asbestos is present and what condition it is in.
- ∂ Make sure you engage a qualified asbestos removal company to remove asbestos in your home. Ask for their licence number and verify it with the licensing authority.
- ∂ Spend some time researching the legal requirements for removing, transporting and disposing of asbestos. A useful guide is the Model Code of Practice – how to Safely Remove Asbestos, published by Safe Work Australia. This will help you to ask insightful questions when you are choosing a removal company.
- ∂ Before the work starts, tell your neighbours what you're doing, assure them you're taking steps to keep them safe, and tell them how to contact you if they have any concerns.
- ∂ Consider obtaining an independent clearance certificate. Once you've finished the home renovations, this certificate will be proof for future buyers that you managed the renovations safely.

³ You should check the requirements for the need for a clearance certificate with the relevant regulator in your relevant jurisdiction as requirements in other jurisdictions may differ to those in Queensland, where the removal work referred to in this case study was undertaken.